



The Weakest Geek

I made an interesting observation at the Software Technology Conference last month. Members of the digerati congregate to determine who among them is the Alpha Geek – the person with the most technological prowess.

Bring together software engineers for a technical discussion at a conference and watch the circumlocution fly. After respectful introductions, potential Alpha Geeks expatiate opinions like Cliff Clavin articulating the mating habits of the Yellow-Bellied-Sap-Sucker to the gang at Cheers.

You have to be shrewd, primed, and agile to run with the big geeks. Hesitate with a banal response, mention an archaic technology, or offer a feeble theorem and your status will drop faster than a California power line.

One gaffe and you are demoted to a nebbish Beta Geek. To stay in the clique, Beta Geeks offer blandishments for Alpha Geek ideas like Gilligan in a conversation with the other Castaways on how to get off the island, e.g., “that’s a good idea Professor ... Skipper has a good idea ... I like Mary Ann’s idea.”

Once these cliques start there are three ways to disband them. The first is free food. Food trumps technological prowess on a geek’s hierarchy of needs. So all dialogue ceases while participants amass large amounts of caffeine and sugar – the breakfast of Alpha Geeks. This, however, is a provisional break. Once geeks restock, there is

a short period of indolence, then the logorrhea resumes.

The second solution can only be employed once during the conference. This occurs when exhibits are opened. All discussion is curtailed and a free-for-all occurs for the coolest vendor giveaways. Only rock concerts, holiday shopping, and downloading music before the Napster court decision, rival the furry of this frenzy.

Since most conference attendees have no control over food or exhibits, their only option to break up a clique is to mention configuration management, documentation, or testing. Drop one of those topics into the discussion and potential Alpha Geeks will chortle and make a graceful exit. Beta Geeks experience temporary paralysis as they search for a complimentary comment. However, do this too many times and you will reach Cipher Geek status – the geek no one wants to talk to.

Lets face facts here, no matter how valuable configuration management, documentation, and testing are to a project, no one likes to talk about them. Like taking out the trash, washing dishes, and cleaning bathrooms – no one wants to do it, but it has to be done. Anyone thinking otherwise has malodorous software.

Take configuration management. It’s obvious to me that designing software is more invigorating than making sure versions are in order. Yet anyone knows that hotshot designers could not design their way out of a paper bag without a good configuration management system. To design otherwise is analogous to spinning plates on the Ed Sullivan show. At first it looks cool, then the plates start to wobble, and it gets real ugly as plates shatter on the floor. So configuration management can be cool as long as someone else is doing it.

How about documentation? Now there is a paradox. Why can’t creative, knowledgeable, bright designers clarify their designs in their native language? Maybe they got into the software business so they

wouldn’t have to deal with English.

Testing may be an engineer’s biggest blight. Although a very noble and necessary part of the profession no other assignment impairs growth, withers ambitions, or impedes one’s progress and prosperity more than testing. Once you have ventured into testing you become branded as a second-class engineer. I’m not saying its right or fair, but it happens. Colleagues ostracize you as a miscreant as you wonder the halls in a company issued testing smock – you know how hard it is to clean software stains.

It would be easy to wallow in pity but my observation is that most test engineers are not helping their cause. Their pusillanimous approach to the mockery reinforces the image. I have one message for test engineers – wake up!

It’s the 21st century and you need to realize you have all the cards. You have the final say. You can expose hotshot designer’s inaccuracies. You have the power! Designers should truckle at your feet in hopes of obtaining favor upon their designs.

I know this is hard to conceptualize after decades of scoffing. Therefore I’m offering you an exemplar. Her name is Anne Robinson, the host of the insufferable game show “The Weakest Link.” Take note of her portentous attitude as she fires verbal laser jabs at her subjects.

Discard the days of meekly handing in problem reports and cowering to prima designers. It is time to hold court with those pompous colleagues. Line them up. Have them defend their designs in excruciating detail. Expose their flaws. Make them sweat.

You can start your own test cliques. Swap stories of grilling designers, compare kickbacks, and discuss the latest smock styles. You know you have arrived when a design engineer joins the group to talk shop and you taunt, “You are the weakest geek. Goodbye.”◆

— Gary Petersen, Shim Enterprise, Inc.